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Scraps for a Thesis

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"Did you remember to tell the stage master I wanted the front row reserved, the entire front center?"

"Mostel, you have asked me a dozen times. I told him. But your party is still not here. We may have to fill the seats with other patrons."

"But Babette . . . She is here?"

"She's seated now. She'll be directly in front of you and your cello. So," the conductor patted Mostel on the shoulder, "what do you say? You will drink with me afterward?"

"The question is, will you drink with me? Because you may not want to. Who knows what tonight brings? Tonight you may despise me."

"Mostel, you are impossible. I am your oldest friend in the world and you talk to me in riddles. You have always such crazy schemes. You know you do not mean to carry them out," the Maestro said. "Just say you will come to Sardi's and be done with it."

"Did you know that Babette is with child?" Mostel liked to say "with child." The words rolled off his tongue.

"I had heard. Is it yours?"

Mostel turned to face the conductor. "It is mine," he said.

"We must go, Mostel. It is nearly time."

"I will follow in a moment. There is something I must tend to."

The Maestro left. Mostel picked the cello gently up from the case. The revolver shifted inside. It was hidden by shadow. He reached for it. "The child is mine," he repeated to himself, tucking the pistol under the front of his cummerbund. He pulled his jacket on, brushed the tails, picked up his cello and followed the Maestro on stage.

Mostel took his chair. Yes, there in the front row sat his Babette. Her face shone even in the dark auditorium. She always had a greasy face. He did not acknowledge her. He would ignore her to entice her further. It would be all the sweeter for her when he finally did look at her.

The violins were tuning. He hated the violins. Squeaky little fiddles, they never sounded full enough. They were not real instruments. When they tuned they made his hair fall out. That was why he was going bald. Every time he listened to them, he felt the roots loosen in his scalp. Then, in a matter of seconds, a hair follicle shoved a single hair out, then another and another. His hair seemed to fall in piles around him. The violins aged him so.

But the cello, the cello was truly an instrument. Mostel stroked the strings of his cello fondly. It was fine and big, like life should be, full of drama and grandiose gesture.

Life should not be diminutive and squeaking like the violins, like his wife. Instead, it should be large and encompassing like his cello, like his Babette. Ah, so she was a whore. She loved life, she loved men, she could not get enough.

Still, the piano player must be shot. Mostel was rather sad about it. But he needed the child. The piano player might lay claim to it. The piano player was not going to ruin this last chance at immortality. What a pompous whimp the man was. It was difficult to believe Babette had not crushed him in the act. There he sat now, at the piano, fluttering his fingers like fruitflays up and down the keyboard.

After he shot the piano player, they would take him away and make fingerprints and unflattering photographs. Mostel knew all about it from the movies. He would tell the police he had committed a crime of passion. They could not convict

him. After they released him from prison he would return to his Babette, his cello, and his child. They would be happy.

What a fuss they were making now about the first chair violin. He was out there with the Maestro, bowing and prancing as if he was personally responsible for the entire orchestra. Mostel sneaked a glance at Babette. She was looking about anxiously. She probably wondered why nobody was seated near her. This show would be just for her. He would see just her face when he pulled out his pistol and shot the piano player. She would be overcome with love at Mostel's devotion. She would feel like Helen of Troy.

The orchestra was ready. The Maestro lifted his baton and the music began.

Mostel played the *Concerto in B Minor* better than he had ever played it, working up to his featured part. His bushy eyebrows held the sweat from running into his eyes, but when he bent his head it sailed off, hitting the chair in front of him. Sweat dropped, too, on his cello and ran down. He could hear himself breathing heavily to the beat of the music. When the spotlight turned on him he was blinded. He played feverishly, brilliantly, in the brightness of the spotlight. The entire orchestra finished the piece.

He broke to the applause of the audience. They were standing. It was the interval. And he had forgotten to shoot the piano player. The greatest physical act of his life, the most dramatic gesture he would ever make, for his posterity, for his son, and he became carried away with Dvorak and forgot to shoot the piano player.

SCRAPS FOR A THESIS

When next at this cold desk I sit
When my bald eyes stare blankly at the sky
Behind which well-shaped image shall I hide

Would a well-oiled anus squeak
Is death more death because he wears a tie
Who gagged the blackbird

When the slack-jawed logman stands with thirsty tongue alack
Where then the guttural utterances
Where the crow's cacophonous caw caw

Throw these sickly thin sinful words into the flames
Step back as they grackle crackle into ashes
Ashes that even piss can't wash away

Walt Whitman childless father of us all
Did you not shake the paint from your ragged brush
And Beat Beat Drums

— Craig Vala